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# “Soft at the Centre”: Using Study Abroad to Stimulate Reflection on Soft Skills

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## ABSTRACT

Study abroad experiences have a clear learning gain for students exemplified through reflection on soft and hard transferable skills that boost graduate readiness. These aptitudes include problem solving, teamwork, and global citizenry. Two time-phased semi-structured questionnaires were administered to a cohort of UK-based university students participating in a recent Criminology program course unit which incorporates a study visit abroad to Slovenia. We analyze how learning on the course unit facilitates reflection on graduate employability skills. The paper finds that there is significant learning gain from participation in study abroad as measured using a “before” and “after” Likert scale scoring mechanism. Study participants raise doubts whether their perceived skills development would have been achieved through domestic UK-based fieldwork. The findings underscore the value of study abroad experiences as an option within all or most undergraduate degree programs. These opportunities provide a key pathway to reflective practice on personal and professional skills.

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## KEYWORDS

Soft skills; employment skills framework (ESF); reflective practice; graduate readiness; learning gains; study abroad

## Introduction

Whilst overseas fieldwork opportunities (short-term study abroad) for undergraduate university students is a relatively novel development in Criminology programs in the UK, it does have a much longer lineage within other subjects such as Geography where it is an intrinsic feature of the subject (see for example Bruun & Guasco, 2024; Dummer et al., 2008; Kobayashi, 1994). In disciplines such as geography, and earth science, fieldwork has been shown to consistently enhance employability skills. The activities that students engage in correlate with the day-to-day task demands that employers in these fields will set. Additionally, physical science fieldwork has been shown to develop wider professional skills such as teamwork and time management (Wheeler et al., 2011). Increasingly, fieldwork skills and their capacity to energize generic competencies (soft skills) are developing broader appeal within Criminology and social science more generally (Barrett et al., 2019; Gavin et al., 2025).

Developing these soft skills and the ability to evidence and narrate them effectively is a key facet of graduates' work readiness (Winterton & Turner, 2019).

The International Fieldwork in Criminology course unit at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK represents a relatively distinct and unique program offering when compared to other UK based Criminology departments. Students are provided with an international and inter-cultural research experience through cross-border European travel and study visit (McGuinness & Simm, 2005). Over several years, the Criminology Department has fostered partnerships with a range of criminal justice and harm reduction agencies in Slovenia. These organizations and their remit provide an important starting point for the student project work and an initial set of research contacts. Students use team-based research project work as the instrument to document an immersive experience and to report on a salient issue relevant to the program and fieldwork context. Their engagement in these academic pursuits is shown to elevate their soft skills competencies. The course unit is a bachelor's degree optional offering available to students on both the Criminology, and Criminology and Psychology degree programs.

## Literature review

### *Hard and soft employability skills*

In doing fieldwork, Criminology students can enhance a broad range of soft and hard skills and competencies. Soft skills, sometimes referred to as social soft skills, are psychological traits that shape how people learn, think, and ultimately how they act. This tacit knowledge includes interpersonal social skills derived from close working contact with other students and staff (Juhász et al., 2023). Deficient interpersonal skills, for example, can lead to misunderstandings and can inhibit collaboration and teamworking. They also include confidence, the ability to self-reflect, and mindful listening to diverse perspectives. More traditional hard skills pertain to technical formal knowledge (Teng et al., 2019). Examples in this context include analytical and problem-solving skills which can be honed through reflecting on criminological and social harm issues and the proposed solutions to crime-related problems.

Applied research skills also fall into the hard skill category and might be boosted through conducting research in unfamiliar socio-cultural environments, but also by looking at criminological processes and linking said processes to real world outcomes. The development of both soft and hard skills complements the UK the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education (2022) and has become a key focus of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Employability and an emphasis on student outcomes are key metrics for HEIs globally, who are keen to ensure that students accrue discipline-based knowledge but alongside this also develop professional skills and work-related experiences (Office for Students (OfS), 2023).

In many countries, the emphasis on academic skills (hard skills) and subject specific knowledge has neglected the global need for the broadening of skillsets that address human agency, such as emotional competencies (Andrews & Higson, 2008). There have been growing calls in recent years for higher education institutions to embed

more opportunities for critical soft skills development within curricula as part of a transition to employment and in light of what has been termed a “soft skills gap” (British Council, 2022; Nagy & Ibbott, 2024; Succi & Wieandt, 2019). Soft skills are reflected in many jobs in high growth sectors and that attract above average median salaries. These calls have become louder in recent years following the COVID-19 pandemic during which the wholesale withdrawal of face-to-face discussion and human physical proximity has had a lasting and in some areas of social life, an enduring impact on social soft skills (Brucks & Levav, 2022; Gnecco et al., 2023).

Growing digitalization and the utilization of technologies have diminished interpersonal interactions, but human skills remain vitally important alongside machine intelligence. Soft skills complement more traditional competencies and underpin a student’s proficiency balance in a world characterized by rapid technological progress (Makridakis, 2017). These ideas around blending core competencies are reinforced by Baird and Parayitam (2019: 623) who argue that:

In the present-day global and competitive economy, the nature of workforce requirements is continuously undergoing phenomenal metamorphosis. To secure a sustained competitive advantage, employers need core competencies in terms of human resources, which are rare, valuable, non-imitable, non-substitutable and non-transferable. (Baird & Parayitam, 2019, p. 623)

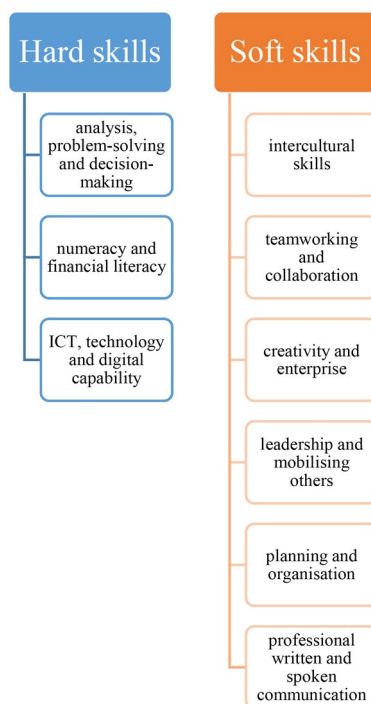
### ***LJMU employability skills framework (ESF)***

Employability skills are seamlessly integrated into the learning outcomes of subject-specific modules and programs across the Higher Education (HE) sector. At LJMU this is achieved through the Employability Skills Framework (ESF) (Liverpool John Moores University, 2025). In developing this skills strategy, the university was guided by both current and past research before identifying nine soft and hard skills which were deemed to be the most prized by graduate employers. Through program reviews and validation processes this framework has been embedded within programs and course units. Each course unit must develop two or three of the ESF competencies in students. The nine skills are shown in Figure 1 and have been further divided by the researchers based on their adjudged status as soft or hard skills.

What is immediately apparent in both quantitative and qualitative terms is the emphasis within the framework on soft skills development as a key pathway to success (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023). Aligning educational policy and approaches with industry demands has become an essential part of university degree programs (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Soft skills are a fundamental requirement in all working environments, and how an individual navigates and enhances these skills provides a lens on their self-efficacy—the inner belief and self-confidence to complete a task or achieve a particular goal (Bandura, 1997).

### ***Hard skills within the ESF***

Whilst this paper focuses on the reflection around soft skills, it would be remiss to completely sideline the development of hard skills. Analysis, problem-solving and decision-making relates to the student’s ability to determine what the problem is and



**Figure 1.** LJMU Employability Skills Framework\*.

\* Source: Liverpool John Moores University (2025). This is the author's own designation of hard and soft skills within this framework.

then take the relevant steps to analyze the available information and apply critical reasoning to find an appropriate solution. Numeracy and financial literacy are the application of numeracy skills to solve real-world problems. Numeric literacy also pertains to the ability to complete basic mathematical calculations, interpret quantitative data accurately, and generate recommendations based on the emerging trends (Liverpool John Moores University, 2025). The mastery of generic ICT skills and digital capability has long been an important consideration and refers to confidence in using a range of digital tools and platforms to communicate and interact online, to search, store and retrieve digital information within the governance of data protection and privacy rules.

### ***Soft skills within the ESF***

As mentioned earlier, the key focus of this paper is students' reflections on their competencies for non-technical soft skills. Planning and organizational skills are fundamental to a student's routine task register. Whether they are fully aware of it or not, students are constantly being asked to prioritize and meet deadlines and deconstruct tasks into smaller bite-size objectives so that progress can be evidenced more clearly (Liverpool John Moores University, 2025).

Professional spoken and written communication concerns writing clearly and concisely, summarizing key messages and developing a tailored communication approach

for the target audience. Professional communication is also linked to delivering engaging presentations with and without technological aids (Liverpool John Moores University, 2025). It also involves developing active listening skills by tuning into the words of another person to build key interpersonal values such as trust, rapport and empathy (Newton, 2024). Within this course unit, students must deliver at least two formative group verbal presentations which chart their research project progress. The three summative assessments for the course unit involve a written research proposal for the proposed study, a set of reflective blogs on research practices in the field, and a research report which brings together the student's desk-based research and the findings from the fieldwork. Only the latter assessment is produced on an individual basis, but all three assessments require active and effective communication skills.

Creativity and enterprise centers on using one's imagination or the minds of a collective of students to explore new ideas and alternative approaches. These inventive skills also require an evaluative approach to weigh the good, bad or indifferent outcomes of decisions taken (Liverpool John Moores University, 2025). The learning and progress from these experiences can then be used to inform the next phase of the work. As stated by Claro and Loeb (2024), this process of trial and error is a demonstration of a growth mindset and a show of resiliency when faced with challenges.

An important adaptation to the course unit has been the facilitation of online fieldwork (Salmons, 2014). Online interviews are an enduring legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to develop alternative pedagogical practices for social science research methodologies (Ryan et al., 2025). Students work together within online spaces and conduct their research with participants who for a variety of reasons are unavailable for face-to-face meetings. Team-based learning whether face-to-face or in online settings can strengthen students' preparedness for the unpredictability of the world of work once they complete their degree programs by equipping them with cognitive and communication skills (Livingstone & Lynch, 2000). These skills transcend the boundaries of the Criminology discipline and are highly appropriate for the hybrid and dynamic work set-ups that constitute the "new normal" in the aftermath of the recent global public health crisis (Lang et al., 2022).

Taking responsibility and being proactive within group situations is at the core of effective leadership and rallying the support and collaboration of others within a team (Liverpool John Moores University, 2025). Within a team-based course unit, someone must step forward and assume the role of project leader in some capacity, and in so doing direct others in crafting a co-designed project. Delegating responsibilities and creating an environment where team members are empowered and comfortable to give and share feedback are also important aspect of this set of skills.

Whilst the potential for intercultural competencies derived from a course unit that incorporates an international study visit is clear, the definition of the term intercultural competencies has been the subject of considerable debate (Deardorff, 2006). For the purposes of this study, the researchers have taken a lead from Byram's (1997) work on intercultural competence in which they state that "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (pp.35).

Byram's contribution can usefully be married with the contemporary explanation proffered by Sarwari et al. (2024) who argue that "In the ever-growing diversified, multicultural environments and organizations, human beings have to interact with people of different backgrounds to pursue and perform their personal, social, and professional lives and duties" (pp. 1). Taken together these explanations provide a working definition of intercultural competency that allows the current study to progress.

Realizing and developing these intercultural capabilities demands that students recognize and respect the diverse backgrounds and values of the research participants, project team members, publics and institutions they interact with (Liverpool John Moores University, 2025). Equally the onus is on students to be introspective and reflect upon how one's own cultural background might shape world views. Among others, Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) point out that three aspects of intercultural competency are evident. Firstly, intercultural communication refers to the various forms of communication required to make oneself widely understood. Secondly, intercultural sensitivity focuses on the diplomacy required to recognize and appreciate the potential difficulties arising from interactions with diverse individuals and communities. Finally, intercultural responsibility demands:

shared commitment to solidarity, critical cooperation, and respectful dialogue among individuals with different languages, cultures, epistemologies, and ethical principles as well as moral choices and values that apply when participating with others in meetings and during any intercultural exchange (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023, p. 2).

## Methods

### *Research design*

Sixty undergraduate Criminology students at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK participated in this study abroad course unit in 2023–24. Toward the end of the course and after twenty weeks of project planning, students spent a week in the Slovenian capital city, Ljubljana. Whilst there they engaged in enquiry-based fieldwork (Deignan, 2009). During the field visit, they met and conducted semi-structured interviews with public, private and not-for-profit agency officials responsible for managing and implementing harm reduction initiatives in subject relevant areas. These topic areas included inter-personal violence, drug harm, homelessness, and forced migration.

The Criminology program at LJMU is one of the largest in the UK in terms of student numbers, with approximately one hundred and fifty students graduating each year with degrees that have Criminology in the award title. All students were in the final year of their three-year bachelor's degree program. Using the JISC online survey tool (JISC, n.d.), two semi-structured questionnaires were designed to gather student views and perceptions of personal learning gains using the aforementioned employability framework as the guiding instrument. Students were invited to score their self-judged skills competency levels on a 10-point Likert scale, where a score of ten represented the highest level of perceived competency and a score of one, the lowest. Each ESF skill was accompanied by a short definition and some illustrations of that

skill to minimize misunderstandings. These definitions were drawn from ESF documentation which in turn were informed by the university's consultative research with employers and the analysis of graduate job recruitment adverts. For example, intercultural skills were defined on the survey form as "recognising and respecting the diverse backgrounds of others, communicating across cultures, valuing other perspectives, and being mindful of your own background and how it might affect your worldview".

Thematic analysis was used to unravel the qualitative reflections. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step thematic analysis procedure, this systematic approach provided a tried and tested approach for the identification of emerging patterns in the data and their subsequent analysis, which ultimately transcends thematic groupings. These six phases include familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and producing the report write-up. The process of coding and theme searching was both flexible and organic and evolved throughout the analytical process. As Hawkins (2018, cited in Zu & Zhao, 2021) state "themes go beyond topical reporting, to provide depth of understanding within an interaction, text, or message, often revealing information about a process or processes that are occurring" (pp. 265).

A "before" and "after" methodology was adopted whereby participants were invited to take part in the study and complete a survey at the start of the course unit. Another survey invite was distributed to participants at the end of the course unit. In total, forty-three students completed the survey at the start of the unit (72% response rate), and forty-six students completed the exit survey at the end (77% response rate).

### ***Research ethics***

Both procedural and practical ethical considerations were adopted for this study. Institutional ethics approval was obtained through the university's research ethics committee (reference: 23/LCP/007). Participants were informed of the purposes of this study with an information sheet that provided full details about the project. The researchers' email addresses were also listed to allow participants to ask further questions about the study.

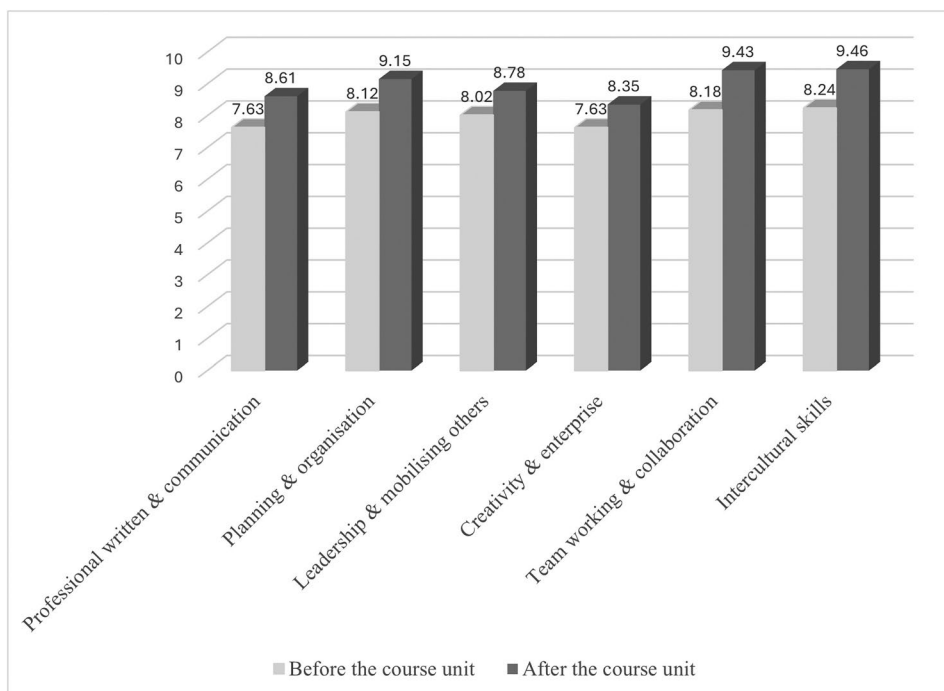
Consent was implied and obtained when participants clicked through to the online surveys and checked a box at the start of the survey form. The online surveys were designed so that no personal identifying information was sought, though participants could add qualitative information freely in open-ended text boxes. The stewardship of the data (raw and analysed) was managed by the researchers and stored in a secure manner within the JISC online survey database.

## **Results and findings**

### ***Soft skills and reflections on overall distance-travelled***

Notwithstanding students' perennial tendencies to over-inflate their abilities at the start of the course unit; the key finding of this study is that participants felt that





**Figure 2.** Students' mean scores for soft skills before and after course unit.

their skills competencies had improved universally across all six soft skill areas (see [Figure 2](#)). Consistently better outcomes as measured through higher scores are recorded across all variables for the post-unit time phase.

These findings are highly encouraging and cement the thinking that the course unit has a plethora of experiential learning benefits to participating students. In the sections below, the spotlight will focus on teamwork and collaboration skills, intercultural skills, and planning and organization skills. These three sets of skills represent the largest movers in terms of the before and after Likert scale scores.

### ***Reflections on teamwork and collaboration skills***

The mean points score improvements were most pronounced with regard to team-working and collaboration (1.25 mean points increase). Prior to the start of the course unit, students commented repeatedly on how ensuring good teamwork represented one of the key challenges of the course unit. In year two of their bachelor's degree two core course units have a groupwork element and a less-than-ideal prior experience was fresh in the memory of some participants. Whilst for others, the risks associated with group work and having a proportion of your grade point average (GPA) determined by the work ethic of others was a prior concern. The following insight from a participant captures the anxiety around groupwork:

I think it might be a challenge to coordinate such a project within groups because the last few times I have done group project modules, there have been many issues such as

people not pulling their weight, not communicating, not attending meeting and seminars etc. (Participant A)

The duration of the year two groupwork course units is a single semester (about 12 wk). The year long duration of the International Fieldwork in Criminology course unit appears to have been instrumental in allowing project teams to build trust and understanding. The significance of the course unit grade for the end of year GPA was also undoubtedly a factor in motivating teams to work effectively as stated by Participant B “Our team really bonded with each other, and we became friends rather than just teammates and we each shared the responsibility of tasks”. Working together on a weekly basis toward delivering on a time-limited project with the added excitement of an overseas field course galvanized the students’ commitment to this course unit and their fellow students.

Teamwork and effective collaboration with group members is at the epicenter of a successful outcome in this module given the nature of the group research project and this partnership working was mentioned multiple times in the qualitative feedback as illustrated below:

The way my team and I worked was so good, we listened and helped each other so much. we were a group with crim, and crim-psych students and the girls doing just crim were so understanding that we had a dissertation to write as well as go on this trip, so they put in a little more work to the prep to allow us not to fall behind in writing our dissertation. (Participant C)

Feel like I took on the role of leadership and ensuring everyone was involved and took on job roles which they felt confident and comfortable doing. Also was happy to be lead facilitator in interviews where others may have been a bit nervous to do so. Feel like our group have become really close and worked really well on the trip. (Participant D)

The need for effective teamwork is intensified further by not only the time constraints prior to the field visit but also the fact that this course unit is just one of a possible four compulsory and optional units that the students might be studying at any one time. External pressures outside the University in the form of caring responsibilities and the need to undertake paid employment can also impact to a greater or lesser extent. Hence identifying mutually agreeable times for the team to meet and deliver on research project milestones presented significant logistical challenges.

### ***Reflections on intercultural skills***

With respect to intercultural skills, the significant uptick in the mean score pre- and post-course unit (1.22 mean points increase) is testament to the students’ growth in awareness of the prevalent customs, codes of practice and ideas in the field trip location. At the start of the course unit, students discussed the prospect of internationalizing their curriculum knowledge and how this might benefit their skills profile more generally:

I chose this module because throughout the course of my time in university studying criminology, the majority of the subject has been focused on a few nations. This module allows me to widen that scope by applying what I have learnt and to adapt it to learning and understanding the difference in criminality across borders. (Participant E)

This transnational perspective and desire to see and experience different cultural settings through the lens of criminology is echoed in numerous contributions from the survey participants:

I chose this module, because we would have the chance to actually implement all of our knowledge so far in regard to theories, into actual field work and on top of that in a different country. We would be able to see different cultures and their visions. (Participant F)

Speaking to people you never usually would and going to a country which wouldn't have been top of my list [was] very rewarding and also very interesting to interview people and find out things on a personal level rather than just reading the data online (Participant G).

At the end of the course unit, participants discuss how “exploring new places and adapting to their cultures” and how “organising meetings with individuals from other countries and cultures has helped us develop this skill” (Participant H). Engaging with international practitioners, policy makers and community activists facilitates reflection on how matters of harm reduction are tackled in alternative contexts and how these approaches differ to one's own lived experiences:

Due to my project being about graffiti, I felt myself becoming more aware of the art and impact that it has on the city it's in, and its people. It has made me very excited to try to understand the graffiti and art in Liverpool, and Newcastle back home to a deeper level. (Participant J)

A fieldtrip overseas... allows us to see life in a different cultural way and how life is different. It allows for some reflection as well especially. Depending on what you're research topic is based on, it can open your eyes a lot more to see how different but also similar problems are around the world. (Participant K)

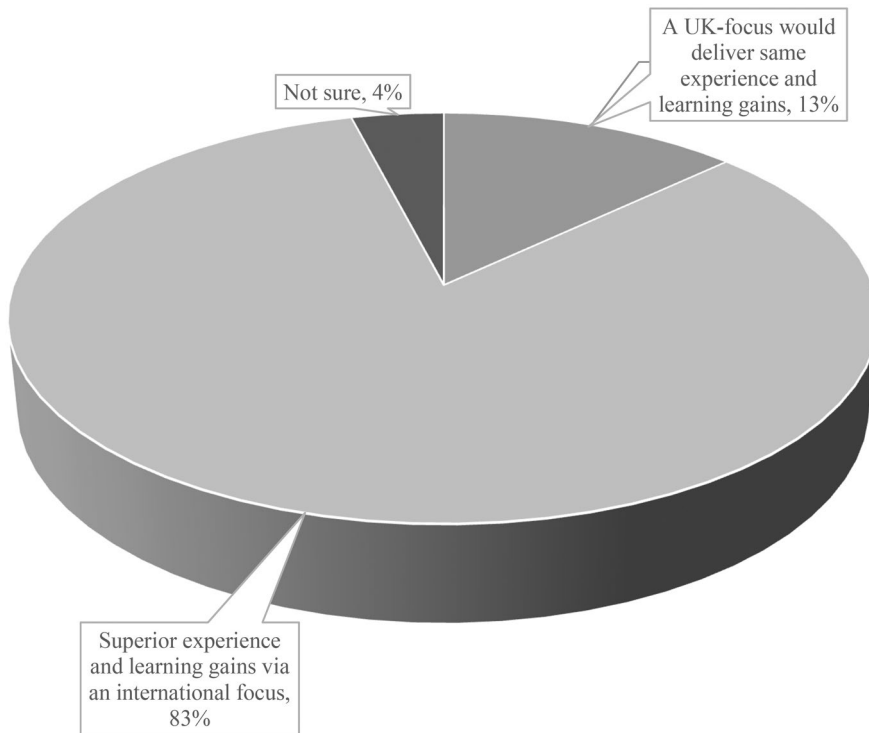
A sense of global citizenship appears to be stirring and an emerging awareness around “Westerncentricism” within Criminology (Moosavi, 2023, p. 138). Participants' insights imply an empathy for alternative contexts beyond the narrow gaze of Anglo-American harm reduction policy and practice.

### ***Reflections on planning and organizational skills***

Planning and organizational skills undoubtedly have overlaps with teamwork and collaboration but also some distinctive features. Planning was the only other soft skill in the ESF that witnesses more than one mean point increase in competency levels. This attests to the largely autonomous nature of the project work. The project deliverables comprise of a multi-stage process of topic conception, gaining ethical approval, designing appropriate research instruments, identifying key research contacts and setting up interviews, and finally undertaking the actual fieldwork in Slovenia before writing up the research report.

### ***Reflections on UK-based fieldwork versus overseas fieldwork***

Within the post course unit survey, participants were asked to reflect on whether they felt that their skills growth could have been achieved to a similar level *via* a UK-focused course unit and field visit. As [Figure 3](#) reveals the overwhelming response was that the international focus was integral to their experiential learning and personal development.



**Figure 3.** UK-based versus an international focus: reflections on learning gains.

For most students, the international dimension of the course unit conjures a sense of unfamiliarity but also excitement. Participants are taken out of their comfort zone and asked to situate themselves in an alternative context with traditions, language and practices that they are unaccustomed to. However, it is this intellectual curiosity for the Other, that elevates the value-added nature of the study abroad course above any similar offerings that might be UK-based. This shared viewpoint is eloquently captured by the following participants who commented enthusiastically:

It allows you to start fresh and not worry about being judged as these people are from a whole other culture and live completely differently to the way we do. It allows us more room to ask about our research and makes having conversation easier as it is more new and real. It nurtured a stronger sense of independence too as we were in charge of organising everything research related ourselves, demanding more professionalism and confidence than in the UK, where we are comfortable doing the same, due to no language barrier. (Participant L)

Getting to explore a new country with my friends and have our own experiences as a group. Being able to go to different organisations in the country and conduct interviews independently and meet new people was a great opportunity to have. (Participant M)

## Discussion

This study represents the first systematic evaluation of the LJMU International Fieldwork in Criminology course unit using the university's ESF as the benchmark. A

quasi-experimental design was used to gather Likert scale scores for skills competencies using a before and after methodology. The semi-structured survey design asked participants for self-assessments on the development of employability skills. Whilst student self-estimations are fraught with a degree of exaggeration, nonetheless this exercise enhances students' critical thinking. It also encourages them to monitor and reflect on the self, their attitudes to learning, as well as current and past academic performance. The hope is that engaging in reflective practice of this nature will provide a model of reflection for lifelong learning.

Overall, the scores attached to skill competencies are universally high. The study findings point to a perceived growth in student self-efficacy for all six soft skills and this key finding was reinforced by the qualitative anecdotes. The mean points score increases for measures taken before and after the course unit were most pronounced for team working and collaboration, intercultural skills, and planning and organizational skills respectively. The significance of these three transferable skills is testament to effective group work at the fulcrum of the course unit. The impact of taking student overseas and changing their cultural lens on criminological phenomena is also prevalent. Whilst planning and organizational skills offer some similarities to the aforementioned teamwork and collaboration, they also require a competency to envision a criminology project and to plan and see it through from start to finish.

It is interesting to note the overwhelming impression of participants when asked if similar learning gains could be achieved from a UK-based course unit and field visit. Eighty-three percent of participants were adamant that the overseas experience elevated the potential learning gains to a level beyond that achievable by a domestic learning experience. The findings lend support to the idea that intercultural exposure arising from off-campus international study can facilitate reflection on graduate-ready skills in ways which may be less evident if the course unit focuses upon familiar contexts. This critical factor is deftly summarized with the complete thoughts of participant K:

I think taking part in a field trip overseas is much more beneficial for students compared to UK trips because it allows us to see life in a different cultural way and how life is different. It allows for some reflection as well especially depending on what you're research topic is based on, it can open your eyes a lot more to see how different but also similar problems are around the world (Participant K).

## Limitations and future research

The discrepancy between the number of students completing the start of course unit survey ( $n=43$ ) compared to the number of students completing the end of course unit survey ( $n=46$ ) combined with the anonymity of the study participants may raise some questions about the extent to which the data from the pre- and post-surveys can be definitively compared. The relatively small sample size might also suggest that the findings, though rich in detail, should be interpreted with a degree of caution. Future studies could expand on our exploration of soft skills across other course units offering study abroad opportunities. Future research could also focus on graduate employment trajectories. It could capture how graduates elucidate these skills within

their curriculum vitae and employability narratives more generally. Longitudinal qualitative tracking of Criminology graduates who have partaken in the study abroad unit would provide valuable insights into how soft skills are articulated in gaining professional employment and how these skills are utilized and developed further.

## Conclusions

Developing students' self-evaluation and reflection on their graduate skills is an important process that should be embedded within all course units and programs more generally. Students need to be aware of their generic competencies, articulate how these skills have resulted, and narrate what mechanisms have enabled this progression. The development of professional skills and work-related experiences are a critical element of graduate readiness but also of economic growth agendas of governments, communities and industries. Employability skills alongside graduate-level employment are also key markers for the new landscape of higher education metrics and performance indicators globally.

Whilst self-assessment can generate an inflated appraisal of one's abilities; this paper has demonstrated learning gains along each of the six soft skills of the university's ESF using 10-point Likert scales. Evidence of these gains is bolstered by rich qualitative insights in which students reflect adeptly upon what they have undertaken and achieved. The skills growth is more pronounced for teamworking, intercultural, and organizational skills because these three competencies are pivotal to the International Fieldwork in Criminology course unit.

This paper contends that the International Fieldwork in Criminology course unit equips students with important insights into professional practice in areas where they may consider working in the future. These snapshots of the terrain surrounding harm reduction and crime control practices help to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It is argued that the knowledge and skills accrued provide an element of acculturation to future professional roles.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Giles A. Barrett:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Giles Barrett**, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK. He is the coauthor of a number of published papers on global majority owned small and medium sized enterprises and is a recipient of an Emerald Group Publishing Literati Prize. He has a wealth of experience in evaluation research on issues as varied as befriending and wellbeing schemes to counteract isolation and poor mental health, through to cannabis use and cultivation, and satisfaction with policing among people of the global majority. He has also led a major EU funded project on 'Reducing Reoffending' with local and international partners. Giles is a member of the Center for the Study of Crime, Criminalization and Social Exclusion (CCSE) at LJMU.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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